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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 004000

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SUBJECT: ASAD ATTACKS MARCH 14 GROUP, ARABS, UNSCR 1701 IN
COMBATIVE SPEECH

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michael Corbin, per 1.4 b,d.

¶1. (C) Summary: In a defiant August 15 speech delivered in Damascus, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad adopted a confrontational tone and criticized different aspects of UNSCR 1701 and the negotiations that led to its passage. He underlined at several points the importance that facts on the ground had played in shaping the resolution, despite defects caused by what he termed American and Israeli influence at the UN. He hailed the heroic resistance of Hizballah and criticized Arab regimes for not standing with it (unlike the SARG and the Arab street, he noted.) Asad also attacked the March 14 group in Lebanon, indicating at one point that some in it had encouraged Israel to attack Lebanon and bore responsibility for the war and the destruction in Lebanon. One Egyptian diplomat predicted that the speech could provoke diplomatic tensions with Egypt and Saudi Arabia because of its veiled but obvious attacks on those regimes. End Summary.

¶2. (U) In a combative August 15 speech to a Syrian journalists association, Syrian President Bashar al-Asad reacted to UNSCR 1701, saying that it reflected "the use of the Security Council against the Arabs. While the resolution had some positive points, especially since it stopped the killing of innocent people, it unfairly "blames the resistance," instead of blaming Israel and its defenders, said Asad. While he did not express outright opposition to the resolution, Asad insisted that calculations of national interest trump international resolutions, "even if this leads to fighting or war."

¶3. (U) Asad noted that the diplomatic efforts that preceded the passage of 1701 indicated that "the Arabs have no weight in international forums." He also stated that 1701 is part of a cluster of Lebanon-related UNSCR's, including 1559 and 1680 that legitimized Israeli and U.S. interests at the expense of Arab interests. In Asad's view, Israel sought the help of the UNSC, which the U.S. has turned into a body that meets the demands of Israel, in order to achieve a political victory and compensate for its military defeat. Asad claimed that it was Hizballah's military strength and the facts on the ground that helped improve some of what he termed the worst aspects in the initial draft resolution. He drew from this claim the larger point that Arabs cannot rely on "the international situation" but must find ways to obtain positions of strength.

¶4. (U) Asad expressed concern for the implementation phase and urged Arabs support Lebanon and "turn the military

victory into a political gain, at least in the peace process." He added that "the battle starts now in Lebanon and noted that "not only we in Syria are standing with the resistance (Hizballah), but all of the Arab street as well."

¶5. (C) Asad attacked unnamed Arab leaders (clearly understood to be those of Saudi Arabia and Egypt) for initially describing Hizballah's abduction of the two Israeli soldiers as adventurous. He made several broader points that cannot have been well-received in those capitals:

-- Arabs have failed in the peace process because they did not maintain other options besides peace, including the option of war, to liberate Arab lands;

-- We ask the Arabs to stand with us, according to our vision, and those who do not should step aside and let us do what is appropriate;

-- Arab officials should side with their people and with the resistance; and,

-- The steadfastness of the resistance compelled Arab foreign ministers to change their divergent positions and adopt a unified position in Beirut.

¶6. (SBU) Asad also attacked the March 14 group in Lebanon, indicating at one point that some in it had encouraged Israel to attack Lebanon and bore responsibility for the war and the destruction in Lebanon. Mentioning the March 14 group in the same context as the short-lived May 17, 1983 peace agreement between Lebanon and Israel, Asad (in a rhetorical flourish he has used in many of his speeches over the past year) seemed to hint -- according to some analysts -- that the current

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government of Lebanon is an agent of Israel.

¶7. (SBU) Asad called the American role in the peace process essential but added that peace could not be achieved under the current American Administration. He attacked Israel in unprecedentedly strong language for him, saying that time is not in favor of Israel and that future Arab generations will find a way to overcome and "get rid of" Israel.

¶8. (C) COMMENT: Regional Arab commentators commenting on Arab satellite TV described the speech as defiant and in essence suggesting Bashar's readiness to accept serious friction with several key neighboring regimes and long-time allies, like Saudi Arabia, Egypt (as well as with Jordan). Some described him as looking tired and nervous at the beginning of the speech, although the overall tenor of the speech seems to point to Bashar's renewed self-confidence. Most of Asad's speeches since the issuance of the first UNIIIC report last fall have been combative and defiant and this one was no exception. An Egyptian diplomat commented that the speech, if it is understood in Cairo the way it was received here, could provoke diplomatic repercussions.

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